

Teresa of Avila: Negative Theologian?

In the previous chapter, Peter Tyler has argued that Teresa of Avila is working firmly in the Dionysian tradition. He shows her many debts Jean Gerson. The resonance between the two writers is striking. A genealogy of influence can be identified: Teresa acknowledges Francisco de Osuna's *Third Spiritual Alphabet*;¹ Osuna cites Gerson, particularly on the experiential and affective nature of mystical theology;² and in turn Gerson cites Dionysius, repeatedly mentioning his Victorine interpreters, Hugh and Richard of St. Victor.³ There are other routes, in addition, that this 'affective Dionysianism' would have found its way to Teresa, via sixteenth century Spanish mystical literature. Luis M. Girón-Negrón mentions as Dionysian influences on Teresa not just Osuna but also John of Avila, Luis de Granada, Peter of Alcántara, and Bernadino de Laredo.⁴ In the background, further mediating figures

¹ V 4:7. References to Teresa of Avila's writings are from Santa Teresa de Jesús, *Obras Completas*, ed. Efrén de la Madre de Dios and Otger Steggink, 9th Edition (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1997), with English translations (page numbers in brackets) from *The Collected Works of St Teresa of Avila*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, 3 vols. (Washington: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1976-1985). The abbreviations used are: V = *Vida (Life)*; CV = *Camino de Perfección (Way of Perfection, Valladolid manuscript)*; CC = *Cuentas de Conciencia (Spiritual Testimonies)*; MC = *Meditaciones sobre los Cantares (Meditations on the Song of Songs)*; M = *Moradas (Interior Castle)*.

² Francisco de Osuna, *Third Spiritual Alphabet* 21:6.

³ Jean Gerson, *On Mystical Theology* 1.6.2; 1.8.5; 1.39.3; 2.12 postscript.

⁴ Luis M. Girón-Negrón, 'Dionysian Thought in Sixteenth-Century Spanish Mystical Theology', in *Re-thinking Dionysius the Areopagite*, ed. Sarah Coakley and Charles M. Stang (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), p. 166.

Bernardino de Laredo, *The Ascent of Mount Sion* (part of which is available in an English translation by E.

between Dionysius and these Spanish Dionysians are also important to recognise: Thomas Gallus, the Carthusian Hugh of Balma, and the Flemish Franciscan Hendrik Herp. Gerson is one of these mediating figures, who helped to produce the major groundswell of affective Dionysian writings that characterised Teresa's spiritual milieu.

More significantly, beyond recognising this genealogy, Tyler argues that in six areas of Teresa's teaching and self-presentation there are strong similarities with the concerns and style of Gerson's mystical theology. To summarise, both building on Tyler's analysis and adding some detail, Teresa's use of the term 'mystical theology' refers to a distinct kind of spiritual apprehension that, as for Gerson, is:

- i) Led by the will;
- ii) Unknown, without the working of the intellect;
- iii) Felt affectively, often in the language of taste (*sabor, gustar*);
- iv) With an ecstasy told in erotic language (derived from the Song of Songs);
- v) In the high point or spark of the soul (Teresa's preferred terms are 'centre', 'deep', and 'very interior' are Teresa's preferred terms, to which I shall return);
- vi) Best understood using a distinctly non-speculative, practical presentation (unlike the Dionysianism of Eckhart or Nicholas of Cusa) which requires plain language, an emphasis on experience, and an outflow from contemplation into active good works.

These were key aspects of mystical theology not just for Teresa and Gerson, but for the tradition of affective Dionysianism as whole. Thus, Tyler's analysis contributes to an understanding of affective Dionysianism, as it reached Teresa through her contemporary

Allison Peers) provides significant Dionysian elements and is cited by Teresa (V 23:12).

Spanish spiritual writers and especially through their common dependence on Gerson, which is itself a valuable conclusion. However, when we ask whether Teresa was a ‘master of the negative way’, two assumptions need to be questioned: first, whether, in affective Dionysianism, it is correct to identify the term ‘Dionysian’ with the ‘negative way’; and following from this, whether Teresa herself was actually a proponent of the negative way, even while allowing that she was strongly influenced by such Dionysian sources, as Tyler has shown.

In scholarship today, ‘Dionysian’ certainly is identified with the negative way. Scholars of Dionysius take Dionysius’ statements in his *Mystical Theology* seriously, that the way of negation is the summit of his theology, going beyond cataphatic or positive theology and indeed beyond anything that we can assert of God or of union.⁵ But in late medieval use of Dionysius, this central insight was often pushed to the margins, beginning with the interpretations of Dionysius in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries by the theologians of St. Victor in Paris, Hugh, Richard and Thomas Gallus, which came to be called ‘affective Dionysianism’. Three innovations were made.⁶ First, Dionysius’ nine-fold hierarchy of angels, a key part of his divine cosmology of emanation and return to God, was allied with the powers of the soul. The Victorines sought to join the anthropology of Augustine to Dionysius’ angelology. Thus, the soul’s powers of intellect and will were identified with Dionysius’ two highest orders of angels, the Cherubim and the Seraphim, as the final two

⁵ Dionysius, *Mystical Theology* 3 (1032D-1033C); *Divine Names* 7:3 (869C-872B). For an example of recent scholarship on this point, see Andrew Louth, ‘Apophatic and Cataphatic Theology’, in *Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism*, ed. Amy Hollywood and Patricia Z. Beckman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 137-146 (140-142).

⁶ The analysis follows Bernard McGinn, ‘Thomas Gallus and Affective Dionysianism’, *Studies in Spirituality* 8 (1998): 81-96.

stages of an ascent to God. Thomas Gallus made a second innovation, insisting that at the highest stage of union with God, occurring in the apex of the mind, knowledge is cut off in a movement of the will beyond intellect, placing will above intellect. Earlier interpreters of Dionysius had not made this disjunction between will and intellect, and between knowledge and love. As Benard McGinn says, now ‘affectivity tends to *exclude* rather than *subsume* human knowledge in the highest stages of the mystical itinerary’.⁷ Third, the affective character of this interpretation was further enhanced by its alliance with the bridal mysticism of the Song of Songs. Gallus took up Bernard of Clairvaux’s experiential language of the bride and the bridegroom, joined in affective love, and asserted that it was what Dionysius had intended in his treatment of *eros*, found in *Divine Names*, Chapter 4, where Dionysius made a passing reference to the fact that God could be known by the names of ‘lover’ and ‘beloved’ in scripture, though he did not mention the Song of Songs.⁸ Dionysianism came, in this view, to focus on the priority of love over knowledge mystical union, while its apophatic dimensions were correspondingly demoted.

Writers following this affective interpretation of Dionysius asserted the negative way in terms of the essential unknowability of God and the darkness of the intellect in the highest union. But it is important to recognise that the place of the apophatic had shifted. Two vital points of Dionysius’ original apophaticism were marginalised in affective Dionysianism. First, Dionysius asserts not merely that we *qualify* our language for God, for instance when we make the statement that God is ‘beyond human knowing’, but that we must exceed language

⁷ McGinn, p. 85. There has been some discussion of this point: see Boyd Taylor Coolman, ‘The Medieval Affective Dionysian Tradition’, in *Re-Thinking Dionysius the Areopagite*, ed. Sarah Coakley and Charles M. Stang (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), pp. 85-102; but McGinn’s assessment stands.

⁸ *Divine Names* 4:7 (701C).

altogether. Since we need language to say or think anything at all, he proposes a way of combining both affirmation and denial together, and then of denying them both (the move which came to be called ‘the negation of negation’), in order to exceed the mind, rather than stopping at any particular statement. On this basis, the affective Dionysian statement that union is to be identified with the will as opposed to the intellect is inadequate, because it fails to appreciate the provisional nature of any human grasp on the divine. For Dionysius, it would make little sense to deny that union is a matter of the intellect and then to assert that it remains in the will. The vital dialectical aspect, of the simultaneous denial of everything that we claim positively in relation to God, which has as its purpose to move beyond both affirmation and denial to a union with what is strictly beyond the mind, loses much of its purpose.⁹ Second, as recent scholars have emphasised in interpreting Dionysius’ apophaticism, the apophatic way employs a rhetoric of negation which achieves its purpose by a performance or ‘choreography’, that is, by patterning our affirmations and denials in relation to one another, rather than simply by affirming or denying this or that in propositional terms.¹⁰ It is more to be understood as a spiritual exercise, a doing, than as a thought or claim. It needs concepts to proceed, but it goes on unsaying programmatically, without ceasing, to reach union, never stopping at a particular claim. It seeks union beyond any statement. In contrast, affective Dionysianism is more broadly a positive theology, only containing negativity at certain points. There is, naturally, some variation between authors within affective Dionysianism as to how much apophaticism they retain, but in general, negation has slipped from its position as an overarching performative dialectic, to one of qualification of certain positive statements.

⁹ For the vital dialectical aspect of negative theology, see Denys Turner, ‘The Art of Unknowing: Negative Theology in Late Medieval Mysticism’, *Modern Theology* 14:4 (1998): 473-488.

¹⁰ Michael Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 1-13.

These rather general criticisms of affective Dionysianism need more detailed support and precision, and I am not suggesting that there are no true advocates of Dionysius' full apophaticism among the affective Dionysians – as my comments later on John of the Cross will indicate. My purpose is, rather, to point out that there is room for the argument that Teresa was Dionysian, yet without affirming that she was a 'master of the negative way', or indeed a negative theologian at all. I shall argue that, while she includes prominent Dionysian themes in her teaching, she is not a negative theologian or 'master of the negative way'. I intend to support this view by now turning in more detail to what Teresa says. Following Tyler's presentation, which gave six points of similarity between Teresa and Gerson on mystical theology, I shall make five points which clarify the view that Teresa is *not* a master of the negative way.

1. *Suspension, which is the cutting off of the faculties, and primarily the intellect, is not apophatic, but a divided state of the soul, still principally positively felt*

Girón-Negrón points to the pivotal role of the 'suspension of the faculties' in Teresa's understanding of both 'mystical theology' and union with God.¹¹ He relates this to Teresa's affective Dionysian sources, particularly Francisco de Osuna's teaching on quiet within the prayer of recollection (*recogimiento*). For instance, in Teresa's first mention of 'mystical theology' in her *Life*, the key 'marker' of 'mystical theology' is her state of suspension:

'A feeling of the presence of God would come upon me unexpectedly so that I could in no way doubt that He was within me or I totally immersed (*engolfada*) in Him. . . . I

¹¹ Girón-Negrón, pp. 167-169.

believe they call it mystical theology. The soul is suspended (*suspende*) in such a way that it seems completely outside itself. The will loves; the memory, it seems to me, is almost lost . . . the intellect does not work.’¹²

Suspension is a feeling of ecstasy, in which the soul departs from its normal operation, especially in the higher faculties of memory, intellect and will. God’s presence is felt intimately within the soul. Significantly, showing her affective Dionysian credentials, Teresa speaks of the will positively, while she is more negative about the other two faculties, memory and intellect. The will loves, while the intellect is picked out as the one that ‘does not work’. Many further references to suspension, told in similar terms, can be found throughout Teresa’s works.¹³

But how apophatic is this state? Suspension is primarily a positive feeling of God’s presence, which has negative effects in the soul and body as its corollary. The will is positively engaged, while the other two faculties are more or less cut off. One part of the soul is positively engaged, another negatively. Rather than calling it a ‘negative state’, it is more precisely a divided state of the soul, part negative, part positive, and one in which the positive element takes priority, as the progress to union is led by the will.

Teresa describes a progress through suspensions to a final state in which all three faculties are taken captive within the union, and the body and senses too are rendered passive, ‘unable to

¹² ‘Venirme a deshora un sentimiento de la presencia de Dios que en ninguna manera podía dudar que estava dentro de mí u yo toda engolfada en El. . . . Creo lo llaman ‘mística teoloxía’. Suspende el alma de suerte que toda parecía estar fuera de sí: ama la voluntad, la memoria me parece está casi perdida, el entendimiento . . . no obra.” V 10:1, p. 66 (vol. 1, p. 105, my adaptation of Kavanaugh and Rodriguez translation).

¹³ e.g., V 14:2; 18 (all); 21:11,19; 40:7; CC 13 (12):1; 58 (59):7; CV 25:2; 4M 1:10-11; 6M 4:5; 10:2.

stir'.¹⁴ It is disturbing and disorientating. But still she stresses that the soul has a positive grasp on the presence of God, against which the disorientation and 'quiet' in the faculties is contrasted. The soul's interior energy is being increased, even while the faculties and body are suspended and it loses exterior agency.¹⁵ Significantly, she says of union at this stage in her explanation, 'What I'm attempting to explain is what the soul feels (*qué siente el alma*) when it is in this divine union.'¹⁶ These are feelings which may include the negative, but which are primarily positive and enduringly capable of *being felt*.

Further, as I shall enlarge upon in my fifth point, Teresa modifies her view that the vital transition to union is marked by suspension in her later teaching, especially in the *Interior Castle*: the feeling of suspension ends and is superseded in the final union by the 'expansion', 'fortifying' and inclusion of the whole soul and body in the divine presence and action, in what must rate as one of the most optimistic, positive anthropologies of human transformation in Christian theology.¹⁷

2. *Teresa's dialectical statements of unknowing-knowing are apophatic, but they remain undeveloped and rare*

¹⁴ e.g., V 15:1; 20:21; 29:12; CV 31:3; MC 4:2; 7:2; 6M 2:3.

¹⁵ V 18:1,10.

¹⁶ 'Lo que yo pretendo declarar es qué siente el alma cuando está en esta divina union.' V 18:3, p. 99 (vol. 1, p. 158).

¹⁷ See the references given under Point 5 below.

Teresa's most apophatic moments in her writing are those where she speaks of the transition to union using both positive and negative terms together, in a dialectical way. Following the quotation above from the *Life*, Chapter 10, for instance, she says,

‘For, as I say, the intellect does not work, but it is as though amazed by all it understands because God desires that it understand, with regard to the things His Majesty represents to it, that it understands nothing.’¹⁸

In a similar vein, she says later, in Chapter 18 of the *Life*, when discussing a further state of suspension which she calls ‘rapture’:

‘The intellect, if it understands, doesn’t understand how it understands; at least it can’t comprehend anything of what it understands. It doesn’t seem to me that it understands, because, as I say, it doesn’t understand – I really can’t understand this!’¹⁹

If one knew nothing of the Dionysian heritage, one might think that Teresa was simply suffering from an experience of God’s ineffability here and unable to express herself as she wished. But in relation to the Spanish sources that we know Teresa read, it is more likely an instance of deliberate Dionysian paradox. Bernard McGinn also noted Teresa’s careful choice of words, as opposed to inarticulacy, in his analysis of the same quotation in Chapter 1 of this book.²⁰

¹⁸ ‘Mas, como digo, [el entendimiento] no obra, sino está como espantado de lo mucho que entiende; porque quiere Dios entienda que de aquello que Su Majestad le representa, ninguna cosa entiende.’ V 10:1, p. 66 (vol. 1, p. 105).

¹⁹ ‘El entendimiento, si entiende, no se entiende cómo entiende; al menos no puede comprehender nada de lo que entiende. A mí no me parece que entiende, porque – como digo – no se entiende. Yo no acabo de entender esto.’ V 18:14, pp. 102-103 (vol. 1, p. 163).

²⁰ [Cross-reference this part of McGinn’s analysis (ch. 1 of this book)]

For instance, we can see the same sort of statement in Osuna:

‘In these forms of recollection the understanding is not so quieted as to be totally deprived, for there always remains a tiny spark, sufficient for the soul to know it is enjoying something and that it is from God. With the soul so quieted and calm, it seems that the understanding is watching what occurs, as if doing nothing.’²¹

Osuna is suggesting that the intellect is able observe what is happening, yet without working: he is both asserting and denying the intellect’s activity, at once. Teresa goes further, piling up repeated denials in a way even more strongly reminiscent of Dionysius’ apophaticism. Recognising the Dionysian background, one can also see a performative aspect to her apophasis, in the way that, far from avoiding this way of speaking, she seems to take some delight in it. She deliberately avoids foreclosing with a final statement, rather engaging the reader in a performance that has no resolution, thus inviting the reader into an apophatic form of understanding beyond affirmation and denial.

Tyler, both in the previous chapter and in other writing on Teresa, points out that Teresa uses a number of linguistic strategies which open up a performative space in her writing, asking the reader to fill something in which cannot be said.²² She asks the reader to provide something out of their experience rather than to let her supply the concepts for thought. As Tyler says, this resembles Dionysius’ preference for a kind of knowing that is attained by

²¹ Francisco de Osuna, *Third Spiritual Alphabet*, transl. Mary E. Giles (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 21:7, p. 574.

²² [Tyler, *Return to the Mystical*, refs – I have yet to find these.]

pathein (to experience/suffer) rather than by *mathein* (to learn).²³ ‘She states clearly here that she cannot *explain* the process but rather that she will *show* it.’²⁴ Tyler adds quotations from several passages in which Teresa uses negative phrases such as ‘I don’t know’ quite extensively, again in a performative and deliberate manner, rather than simply to acknowledge ignorance.²⁵

The difficulty, however, is twofold. First, Teresa’s explicitly dialectical statements, such as the ones I have just quoted, are quite rare in her writings. They are both apophatic and Dionysian, but she employs them only in passing and she does not develop them. She never reflects on their value for her mystical teaching more widely. Second, and more pressingly, in the majority of cases where Teresa uses a performative rhetorical strategy, such as ‘I don’t know’, it is not an apophatic one. That is, though her ‘I don’t know’ statements demand a performance in relation to the reader (a *pathein* rather than a *mathein*), and contain at least one denial in the form of the ‘I don’t know’ itself, they are packed around with statements about how God’s (positive) ‘presence’ can, primarily, be positively felt.²⁶ The discourse is mainly a cataphatic one, of attaining a discernment of the divine presence, by positive means. So a distinction is necessary here: while it can be affirmed that Teresa makes ample use of performative discourse, often including some negative statements such as ‘I don’t know’, her approach to God is not itself primarily negative or dependent on a negative way or strategy.

²³ Tyler, [Typewritten MS, p. 17], referring to Dionysius.

²⁴ Tyler, [Typewritten MS, p. 11].

²⁵ See Tyler’s examples on [p. 15] (4M 3:3), [p. 19] (6M 2:4). Also see, e.g., CC 1:21; 58(59):18(21).

²⁶ An example is to be found in the next quotation.

3. *Teresa's negativity only refers to the soul, not to God*

My claim that Teresa's discourse is cataphatic rather apophatic can be supported, further, by recognising that she only uses positive terms such as 'presence' for God. She does not speak of the absence or darkness of God.²⁷ Her negativity is confined to aspects of the soul's response to God, rather than to God's own self-revelation. So she will say in one of her *Spiritual Testimonies* (*Cuentas de conciencia*), summarising her teaching on 'supernatural things' in prayer, recorded in Seville in 1576 (no. 58/59):

'I see clearly that the Persons of the Trinity are distinct . . . except I do not see or hear anything But there is a strange certitude even though the eyes of the soul do not see. And when that presence (*presencia*) is gone, the soul is aware that it is gone. The how of this presence I do not know; but I do know very well that it is not imagined.'²⁸

The passage is valuable for our purposes because it is one of those rare occasions where Teresa uses a number of combined affirmations and negations: 'I see . . . except I do not see'; the soul is 'aware' even when 'that presence is gone'; it is a presence whose how 'I do not

²⁷ There is just one occasion (that I can find) on which Teresa uses a negative term for God with approval, when she says that the soul 'feels itself totally engulfed and protected in this shadow and kind of cloud of Divinity' in the *Meditations on the Song of Songs* (MC 5:4, p. 249). As Gíron-Négron suggests, this is no doubt taken from an affective Dionysian source, recalling the popular Dionysian image of Moses' ascent into the cloud, from Dionysius' *Mystical Theology* (Gíron-Négron, p. 169). But it is notable that she does not adopt the image in a negative sense: she understands the 'cloud' as a state of 'repose' and 'protection', under which God's positive presence is felt and available (see her explanation).

²⁸ 'Las Personas veo claro ser distintas . . . salvo que no veo nada, ni oyo . . . ; mas es con una certidumbre estraña, aunque no vean los ojos del alma, y, en faltando aquella presencia, se ve que falta.' CC 58(59):18(21), p. 628 (vol. 1, p. 431), translation adapted.

know', yet one 'I do know' is 'not imagined'. But it is notable that the negativity refers only to Teresa's state, which is an unknowing-knowing of the kind we have already seen; and it is offset by the assurance that she knows God's presence here 'very well'. It does not apply to God, whose positive presence is unqualified. The feeling comes and goes, and is hard to pinpoint, requiring both affirmation and denial, but it is always a feeling of God's *presence*, and the positive character of this presence is not itself doubted or denied. The negative language, too, is confined to the kind of duality in the soul that I noted above: the apprehension is primarily positive and knowable as such, only also double-edged, part positive and part negative.

Thus, Teresa is working with cataphatic notions of both (a) divine presence, and (b) the soul's manner of apprehension of God. (b) is qualified by negation, as something that is *also* negative, though without challenging the positive aspect; while (a) is not qualified by negation, remaining wholly positive.

4. *Comparison with John of the Cross clarifies Teresa's preference for the positive over the negative way*

It is worth making a brief comparison with John of the Cross, since John also imbibed the affective Dionysianism of their shared Spanish spiritual milieu, but did so with a greater emphasis on the apophatic. Without going into John's entire thought here,²⁹ I would like to focus on John's use of the term 'darkness'. Darkness is, of course, the central metaphor of

²⁹ Girón-Negrón situates John among the distinctive Dionysianism of sixteenth century Spanish writers, drawing out distinctively Dionysian elements (pp. 169-174).

his *Ascent of Mount Carmel* and *Dark Night*. ‘Darkness’ refers both to the soul’s subjective state in relation to God, as it feels lost and abandoned on the path to union with God, and to God, whom John describes as a ‘ray of darkness’, quoting Dionysius. The difference from Teresa is not just that John uses the negative term darkness to name God, however, but that he regards subjective darkness as vital and beneficial to the soul’s growth towards union.³⁰ The inner experience of darkness, as a feeling of dryness and abandonment by God on the path to union, helps the soul to move from an immature dependence on sweet feelings and misapprehensions of God in terms of things less than God towards the goal of meeting the true being of God, in the ‘dark inflow’ of contemplation without the particular forms of creatures, in union.³¹ This element of divine darkness, and the value that John places on it for the soul’s growth, is very different from Teresa.

John regards the metaphors of darkness as a transformative tool to move the soul beyond every kind of positive apprehension of God to the moment of ‘naked’ personal surrender. It is a move closely paralleling Dionysius’ ‘negation of negation’, yet now told in more psychological terms, in that the soul moves beyond God as ‘light’ and God as ‘darkness’, to attain the divine coincidence of opposites – *todo y nada*, all and nothing, darkness and light – holding both together, yet without confusing them. The tension between them is the energy of transformation. John clearly seeks not merely to qualify positive statements of how God is felt by the soul, as Teresa does, but to make negation the defining tool of his mystical theology (at least in the *Ascent-Night*).³²

³⁰ *Ascent* Prologue, 3-4. ‘Ray of darkness’: *Ascent* 2.8:6; *Night* 2.5.3; *Canticle* 14&15:16; *Flame* 3:49.

³¹ To summarise the whole of the *Ascent-Night*.

³² The move, though still present, is made rather differently in John’s *Spiritual Canticle* and *Living Flame of Love*. For instance, in the *Canticle*, the ‘coincidence of opposites’ occurs at the moment that the ‘wounded stag’ appears on the hill, where the soul’s negative sense of its own wound is met by the discovery that the wound is

In terms of growth, Constance Fitzgerald has helpfully interpreted John's approach as placing the highest value on what she calls the experience of 'impasse'.³³ An impasse is where the soul can see no way out of or beyond the experience that it is going through. John values this experience for the way that it can be used as a means to dismantle the false self, breaking down the path of reason that possessively seeks control over its objects. That is to say, in the subject's inner appropriation of John's language of darkness, darkness turns back on itself, breaking through the barrier the soul has itself erected to God's presence. Impasse is then appropriated positively, in a paradoxical positive-negative tension, which deconstructs the very line of reasoning that produced the impasse. This alone can open the soul to what is wholly beyond it. It is possession by total dispossession, a truly Dionysian working out of mystical transformation in psychological categories.

Teresa is similarly unimpressed by the egocentric tendencies of reason on the mystical journey and demands its abandonment.³⁴ But she regards the soul as capable of this total surrender without resorting to the kind of thoroughgoing self-negating deconstruction favoured by John. I have suggested elsewhere that the reason for this difference probably lies in Teresa's greater suspicion of the uses to which feelings of 'fear' and 'misery' can be put in human relationships, not least by misguided spiritual directors.³⁵ John says that, when one is

shared by Christ, the Beloved, so that it can be possessed as love in relation to the other, uniting it to Christ, rather than as merely negative self-possession. 'Among lovers, the wound of one is a wound for both' (*Canticle* 13:9, p. 460).

³³ Constance Fitzgerald, 'Impasse and Dark Night', in *Women's Spirituality: Resources for Christian Development*, ed. Joann Wolski Conn, 2nd ed (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), pp. 410-435.

³⁴ e.g., 3M 2:8.

³⁵ Edward Howells, *John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila* (New York: Crossroad, 2002), p. 131.

in the dark night, it is not possible to distinguish merely human experiences of misery and fear from the divinely given darkness. Teresa finds this unacceptable.³⁶ She holds that such negative feelings need sifting out, as features merely of one's own incapacity. She wants to keep the focus on the positive discernment of the positive divine presence. She never says, as John does, that God causes darkness in the soul, for growth.³⁷ Whatever the reason, Teresa does not value the experience of total inner impasse, where the positive element is wholly obscured, as part of healthy spiritual growth.

If this appears to draw too strong a contrast between the two Carmelites, it is helpful to recognise the different Christological images that John and Teresa use to underpin their approaches. For John, the centre of the dark night, which Iain Matthew calls the 'hinge chapter' of the *Ascent-Night*, is Chapter 7 of Book 2 of the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, where John introduces Jesus' cry of dereliction from the cross ('My God, my God, why have you forsaken me'). Here, John says, Jesus 'brought about the reconciliation and union of the human race with God . . . at the moment in which he was most annihilated in all things'.³⁸ It is our reception of this 'moment' of simultaneous death and birth, in which the soul feels only abandonment and dereliction, unable to see the divine presence, that John finds most potent for spiritual growth. Again: Teresa does not. She does not ignore the cross, indeed she calls the experience of the cross the 'foundation' on which the entire edifice of the soul's transformation is built.³⁹ But the cross is a dual experience, of both loss and perceptible, closely approaching divine companionship. In the *Interior Castle*, for instance, Teresa

³⁶ Ibid., esp. nn. 13, 14, 17.

³⁷ *Ascent* Prologue, 3.

³⁸ 'Fue reconciliar y unir al género humano por gracia con Dios . . . al tiempo y punto que este Señor estuvo mas anihilado en todo.' *Subida (Ascent)* 2.7:11, p. 311 (124).

³⁹ e.g., 2M 1:7.

regards the cross as the pain of giving up everything for God, including the need for favours and feelings of God's presence, but it is offset by the sure sense of God's presence at a deeper level and a knowledge of 'how this true lover never leaves it'.⁴⁰ Teresa's central image of Christ is of the one whose companionship is becoming increasingly evident from the moment the soul sets out on the journey of active faith. It may be shaky at first, but transformation enables the soul to feel and know this presence better, and it is a presence that is never called into doubt. The image of Jesus' continuing presence is to be contrasted with John's image of God's absence in the cry of dereliction. God's absence is not the goal for John, of course, but as a true follower of the negative way, he regards absence as the key to presence, and a moment of maximal combination of both absence and presence (where God's presence is asserted while also being entirely obscured and felt as absence) as the centrepiece of the soul's transformation.

The comparison shows the different directions in which the Dionysian heritage could be taken. As affective Dionysians, both Teresa and John read Dionysius in anthropological terms, as a progressive transformation of the soul into the likeness of Christ. But John alone seeks to develop a psychology of simultaneous darkness and light, where the negativity of impasse is valued as the vital point of transition to mystical theology. Teresa eschews the central paradox of the 'ray of darkness', giving a more incidental and occasional role to negation.

5. *Teresa's anthropology becomes less negative (more positive) as her thought develops*

⁴⁰ 'Cómo nunca se quita de con él este verdadero Amador.' 2M 1:4, p. 438 (vol. 2, p. 299); 2M 1:6-7.

I began by noting that the element of suspension, so strongly associated with Teresa, is, above all elements in her thought, used to mark her out as a ‘negative’ theologian. She meets God in an ecstasy in which the human faculties, senses and body are left behind, paralysed and, in this sense, negated. This is the state that corresponds to the great statue by Bernini. Tyler asserts that Bernini distorts Teresa’s experience by lifting it out of its context.⁴¹ The context for Teresa is of an ongoing human transformation, including her work of reform, which is, indeed, far from the exclusively otherworldly and passive image shown Bernini. For Teresa, ecstasy of this kind serves properly mystical transformation, but it is not its essence. Yet she expressed this fact only gradually in her mystical teaching. In the *Life* and her early writings, union is very much of this kind, increasingly strongly identified with suspension as transformation proceeds, to the point where the whole soul and body is ‘unable to stir’.⁴² Around the time that she wrote the *Meditations on the Song of Songs*, however, and certainly by the time of the *Interior Castle*, suspension was downgraded.⁴³ In the *Interior Castle*, suspension is found in the Fourth to the Sixth Mansions – so it is still a vital element – but it is superseded in the Seventh. In the Seventh Mansions, Teresa says that suspension is only to be associated with rapture, and that it occurs in what she now calls the ‘superior part’ of her soul, whereas here, rapture ceases and union occurs in the ‘centre’.⁴⁴ The ‘centre’ is where the mystical marriage of Christ and the soul takes place, and the point with which all parts of the soul are now integrated. From the centre, ‘arrows’ are sent out of the castle, and from the centre the divine breasts of the Song of Songs give milk to all the people of the

⁴¹ Tyler, [Typewritten MS, pp. 19-20].

⁴² References as above, nn. 13-14.

⁴³ The development is charted in Howells, pp. 70-92.

⁴⁴ 7M 1:5; also 7M 2:5; 3:12.

castle.⁴⁵ Union energises the whole soul, in all its faculties, senses and body, for service flowing directly out of the centre, so that Martha and Mary join together in good works.⁴⁶

Union is no longer negative, characterised by suspension and bodily paralysis. Teresa is also clear that all three higher faculties of memory, intellect and will are positively engaged.⁴⁷ Intellect, in particular, can now see what is happening in the centre of the soul so that it knows what is God's will and can perform it directly.⁴⁸ The centre of the soul is not just affectively energised but can see its place with God in union, with its understanding. The intellect does not always have the clarity of a supernatural vision, but it retains the awareness of the immediate divine company permanently.⁴⁹ Teresa's term 'centre of the soul' retains an interesting negativity. It is both a somewhere and nowhere, in the way that Teresa speaks of it, immanent in the soul and transcendent, at once.⁵⁰ It recalls the 'depth' of the soul in the Rhineland mystics, which was itself a Dionysian trope, but in the speculative more than the affective development of Dionysianism.⁵¹ I can only acknowledge the question of the centre of the soul as an avenue for further discussion here. But its nature does not alter the

⁴⁵ 7M 2:1,6.

⁴⁶ 7M 3:12; 4:6-12.

⁴⁷ 7M 3:12.

⁴⁸ 7M 1:9; 2:6,8; 3:9,11.

⁴⁹ 7M 1:7.

⁵⁰ Peter Tyler, 'To Centre or Not to Centre: St Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross and the "Centre of the Soul"', in *Christian Mysticism and Incarnational Theology*, ed. Louise Nelstrop and Simon D. Podmore (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2013), pp. 177-190.

⁵¹ On the language of 'depth' and 'centre' in John and Teresa, see Howells, pp. 17, 34, 47-50, 55-59, 89-91, 114-117, 121-123.

fundamentally positive and Augustinian structure that Teresa has developed in her anthropology in her later works.

Without being able to flesh out Teresa's mature understanding of mystical transformation fully, it is vital to recognise that she has moved closer to an affirmation of the fulfilment of the higher faculties in union than where she started. She has a positive anthropology of transformation which is closer to Augustine's than to a Dionysian negativity. Union still has elements of duality, for Teresa, of being at once within and beyond the soul, particularly in the notion of the soul's 'centre', but the faculties can accommodate this duality positively, as their proper fulfilment and function.

Conclusion

I do not want to imply that Teresa is somehow less of a theologian for not being a 'master of the negative way'. This is not a return to that discredited reading of the relationship between John and Teresa which found intellectual coherence and satisfaction in his thought, but 'mere experience' and secondhand theology in hers. Rather, it is an attempt to be clear on important lines of difference, not just between them, but within the intellectual tradition known as 'affective Dionysianism'. Teresa certainly takes on major lines of thought from this tradition, but she is a cataphatic thinker, apophatic only to the extent that any good theologian is – that is, qualifying the extent to which the soul can ever really grasp or be like God – while lacking vital constituents of Dionysius' apophaticism, so that it would be strange, misleading even, to call her a 'master of the negative way'.